



But some writers of the then-nascent Internet journals called weblogs, or blogs for short, were not so willing to let it go. From the political left and right, the bloggers, as these writers have come to be known, expressed outrage. Some of their ire was directed at the media for its inattention, and after a few days of the bloggers' attacks, major media organizations decided to cover the story. A few days after that, Lott's support among his colleagues dwindled and he ultimately stepped down from his Senate Republican leadership post.

The incident was an early warning of sorts, for politicians, public figures of all kinds, and people in the media. It signaled the accelerating evolution of communications. Blogs were coming into their own, and they have become more and more of a force.

What are blogs, exactly? There's no single definition, but most have at least three things in common. They are typically composed of short essays, also called postings. The postings are shown in reverse chronological order—that is, most recent items at the top. And they have hyperlinks pointing to other Web pages.

Blogs are a conversational medium. Many of the best blogs let readers post comments, and bloggers are fond of pointing at each others' work to highlight and discuss it.

They are also conversational because the best blogs are written with a distinctly human voice. We can contrast this with the typical newspaper article, which feels as though it was written according to a formula and by a committee, not a person. The blog's very humanity is a vital boost to the form.

Blogs should also be understood in their wider context, as a proxy for the many different ways that average Internet users are now able to publish (in a variety of formats, including audio and video) their own works online. This is part of the democratization of media, both in creation and distribution. The tools we use to create digital content are increasingly powerful but decreasingly expensive. And we can show our work to a potentially global audience. There is no analog in human history for this development.

According to the Pew Internet Project, a nonprofit organization researching the Internet's impact on various aspects of American life, blog reading has risen along with blog creation. More than a quarter of the U.S. population has read a blog and, while the numbers flattened somewhat during 2005, mass-media coverage has given blogs higher visibility than ever.

Bloggers have won the most attention for their writing about highly topical issues in politics, technology,

and other such fields. But we must recognize that most blogs—the vast majority of the millions now online—are not aimed at large audiences yet have high value. For some bloggers, their online journals have essentially replaced the traditional letter home to family and close friends. The value the reader gains from those highly personal blogs must surely be higher per reader than the equivalent value of the most popular sites.

Blogging took off first in the United States. This was predictable, given that the early online tools came from U.S. software developers. But it is becoming a global phenomenon. China, for example, has some 5 million bloggers, a rough estimate and a relatively low percentage of the population. More and more Chinese people are launching their own blogs despite censorship by government (with the assistance of technology companies). Africa has the lowest blogger numbers of any continent; Ethan Zuckerman, co-founder of the Global Voices Online project at Harvard University's Berkman Center for Internet & Society, says the best estimates suggest there are about 10,000 bloggers in sub-Saharan Africa. Numbers are growing in the Middle East and North Africa, he says, with some 50,000 mostly young people posting to their blogs.

Among the most ardent blogging nations outside the United States is France, with more than 2 million bloggers, according to software executive Loic Le Meur. They're having an impact. He says three government ministers have invited bloggers to interview them; Le Meur was himself part of one of those sessions. He notes that blogs are becoming one of the most important means of expression in that nation and are causing some worry in the ranks of mainstream journalism.

The relationship between bloggers and journalists has been noteworthy. Some professionals jumped into blogging enthusiastically. Others have dismissed the entire genre.

I started what is believed to have been the first blog by an American mass-media journalist in 1999, when blogging software was only just beginning to appear. I was writing about technology, and the blog, which appeared in addition to my newspaper column at the *San Jose Mercury News* in California's Silicon Valley, became an essential part of my job. Why? Because it enabled me to have more of a conversation with my readers. I'd learned quickly, writing about technology in Silicon Valley, the heart of the high-tech industry, that my readers collectively knew much more than I did, and the blog was another way of learning.

Since then, blogging has slowly intersected with the news business. The Pew Internet Project found that American journalists are much more likely to read blogs than the general public. This is unsurprising, because blogs are serving a role somewhat like the trade journals, which are valuable source material for reporters in any number of disciplines.

Even now, however, most professional journalists do not publish blogs. The format, which tends to encourage a personal voice, has felt somewhat unnatural to professionals who are trained to keep their own feelings and beliefs out of what they write and broadcast. Opinion columnists are the obvious exception to this general rule, and several business columnists have been among the best in the genre, offering deeper insights into the issues they cover in the print editions. This approach is also working well for journalists who cover other kinds of topics, notably entertainment.

Blogs can also bring a quality to news coverage that is still somewhat rare: transparency. News people demand transparency from others but have typically been less willing to shine lights on their own business. This is changing for the better, and blogs are a useful tool in that process. CBS News's PublicEye blog, for example, offers insights into the broadcaster's own operations.

Blogs have turned out to be particularly well suited to breaking news, such as natural disasters, about which readers are hungry for every scrap of new information. In one especially notable case, the blog replaced the front page for a time. The New Orleans *Times-Picayune*, forced out of its own building along with other residents of the city that was nearly destroyed by Hurricane Katrina, helped keep its readers informed via a blog when the print edition couldn't be published.

Blogs by journalists make up a tiny percentage of all blogs, of course. Some bloggers do superb journalism

on their own, competing for attention from readers and respect from sources. Bill Gates, the co-founder and chairman of Microsoft Corporation, has given interviews to bloggers who write only online. Other corporate executives are learning that key bloggers can be an excellent conduit to the general public.

Inevitably, media companies have considered capturing the best blogging talent for themselves. One company, Weblogs Inc., a producer of niche blogs on topics like technology and automobiles, was purchased by Time Warner's AOL division for a reported \$15 million. More such deals are likely.

But even if major media organizations try to co-opt the blogging movement, they can't succeed. The financial barrier to entry in this marketplace is close to zero already. Anyone with talent and time can create a blog—or podcast or other media site—without spending a fortune.

It is also inevitable that the rise of blogging has led to questions and criticisms about bloggers' frequent willingness to shoot verbally before aiming. Nor are fairness and thoroughness thought to be among bloggers' best qualities. But in a marketplace

of ideas, inaccuracies tend to be found and pointed out, and reputations rise and fall on quality to a serious degree. Meanwhile, the readers of blogs are learning to apply appropriate skepticism to what they read online.

Blogs and related citizen media are not going away. They have become a liberating venue for people's voices. A longstanding maxim of American media has held that freedom of the press belongs to those who own a press. In the new era of digital media, we all own a press—and the more voices, the better. ■

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*The opinions expressed in this article do not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the U.S. government.*

Photo montage: The number of bloggers around the world increases daily. Blogs in Chinese, Arabic, Portuguese, and Japanese are among the millions of blogs on the Internet. (All photographs from AP/WideWorld Photos)

